We claim:

1.   A method for use by a service provider to facilitate communication between customers of the service provider, the method comprising the   steps of:

    receiving a request from a customer to establish communication with another customer;

    confirming the identity of each customer;

    transmitting to each customer executable code enabling encrypted communication therewith;

    obtaining from each customer information regarding the customer's computing environment;

    preparing a set of applications for use by each customer, in accordance with said information and said request;

    transmitting the set of applications as executable code to each customer;

    establishing a communication path to each customer; and

    specifying the communication path to the customers, thereby permitting the customers to communicate over said path using said applications.

2.   The method of claim 1 wherein said confirming, transmitting and obtaining steps are performed via the Internet, and said establishing step comprises

    obtaining connectivity services via the Internet for use by the customers; and

    altering the communication path in accordance with customer requirements.

3.   The method of claim 2 wherein the connectivity services are obtained by contacting a vendor of said services via the Internet.

1   4.   The method of claim 1 wherein the communication path is established for a

2   limited time period.

1   5.   The method of claim 1 wherein said preparing step comprises obtaining at

2   least one of the applications via the Internet.

1   6.   The method of claim 1 wherein said method is performed using an edge-

2   of-network server.

1   7.   The method of claim 6 wherein said preparing step comprises obtaining at

2   least one of the applications from a storage device connected to the server.

1   8.   The method of claim 2 wherein the specified communication path is

2   established on the Internet and communications using the path are encrypted, so that the

3   customers participate in a secure virtual trading zone.

1   9.   The method of claim 1 further comprising the step of monitoring the

2   communication path.

1   10.   The method of claim 1 wherein said obtaining step is performed using an

2   applet resident at the customer.

1 11. A system for facilitating communication between customers of a service

2 provider, the system comprising:

3 a server connected to the Internet,

4 the server being enabled to perform a method including the steps of

5 receiving a request from a customer to establish communication with another

6 customer,

7 confirming the identity of each customer,

8 transmitting to each customer executable code enabling encrypted

9 communication therewith,

10 obtaining from each customer information regarding the customer's computing

11 environment,

12 preparing a set of said applications for use by each customer, in accordance with

13 said information and said request,

14 transmitting the set of applications as executable code to each customer,

15 establishing a communication path to each customer, and

16 specifying the communication path to the customers, thereby permitting the

17 customers to communicate over said path using said applications.

1 12. The system of claim 11, further comprising a dedicated communication

2 link to a provider of connectivity services.

1 13. The system of claim 11 wherein said server performs the confirming, transmitting

2 and obtaining steps via the Internet, and the establishing step comprises

3 obtaining connectivity services via the Internet for use by the customers; and

4 altering the communication path in accordance with customer requirements.

1   14.   The system of claim 13 wherein the server obtains the connectivity services

2   by contacting a vendor of said services via the Internet.

1   15.   The system of claim 11 wherein the communication path is established for a

2   limited time period.

1   16.   The system of claim 11 wherein in the preparing step the server obtains at

2   least one of the applications via the Internet.

1   17.   The system of claim 11 wherein said server is an edge-of-network server.

1   18.   The system of claim 11, further comprising a storage device connected to the

2   server, and in the preparing step the server obtains at least one of the applications from

3   said storage device.

1   19.   The system of claim 11 wherein the server is enabled to establish the specified

2   communication path on the Internet with communications using the path being

3   encrypted, so that the customers participate in a secure virtual trading zone.

1   20.   The system of claim 11 wherein the server is enabled to monitor the

2   communication path.

1   21.   The system of claim 11 wherein the server obtains the customer information

2   using an applet resident at the customer.

1   22.   A computer program product comprising instructions for performing a method

2   to facilitate communication between customers of a service provider, the method

3   comprising the steps of:

4   receiving a request from a customer to establish communication with another

5   customer;

6   confirming the identity of each customer;

7   transmitting to each customer executable code enabling encrypted

8   communication therewith;

9   obtaining from each customer information regarding the customer's computing

10   environment;

11   preparing a set of applications for use by each customer, in accordance with

12   said information and said request;

13   transmitting the set of applications as executable code to each customer;

14   establishing a communication path to each customer; and

15   specifying the communication path to the customers, thereby permitting the

16   customers to communicate over said path using said applications.

1   23.   The computer program product of claim 22 wherein said confirming,

            transmitting

2   and obtaining steps are performed via the Internet, and said establishing step comprises

4   obtaining connectivity services via the Internet for use by the customers; and

5   altering the communication path in accordance with customer requirements.

1   24.   The computer program product of claim 23 wherein the connectivity services are

2   obtained by contacting a vendor of said services via the Internet.

1　25.　The computer program product of claim 22 wherein the communication path is
2　established for a limited time period.

1　26.　The computer program product of claim 22 wherein said preparing step
2　comprises obtaining at least one of the applications via the Internet.

1　27.　The computer program product of claim 22 wherein said method is performed
2　using an edge-of-network server.

1　28.　The computer program product of claim 27 wherein said preparing step
2　comprises obtaining at least one of the applications from a storage device connected to
3　the server.

1　29.　The computer program product of claim 23 wherein the specified
　　　communication
2　path is established on the Internet and communications using the path are encrypted, so
3　that the customers participate in a secure virtual trading zone.

1　30.　The computer program product of claim 22 wherein the method further
2　comprises the step of monitoring the communication path.

1　31.　The computer program product of claim 22 wherein said obtaining step is
2　performed using an applet resident at the customer.